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A Study on the Psychological Motivations Behind Audience Rewards in Team Performance Livestreams

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Abstract. In recent years, with the development of mobile internet and the widespread adoption of social platforms, team performance livestreams have become an important form of online entertainment for young users. Audiences support their favorite streamers through rewards, which not only satisfies the need for emotional release but also allows them to seek identity recognition and social connection through virtual interaction. This study aims to explore the consumer motivations behind audience reward behavior in team performance livestreams, with particular attention to the complex manifestations of these motivations in the context of "stress relief." This study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with over ten users who have experience in livestream rewarding, combined with qualitative analysis using open coding methods. The results indicate that audience reward motivations can be primarily categorized into three types: emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and competitive comparison. Among these, "emotional reciprocity" was the most frequently mentioned motivation, reflecting audiences' desire to respond to the streamer's emotional investment and companionship through rewards. "Identity construction" and "competitive comparison" demonstrated stronger social and group recognition needs, with audiences using consumption behavior to maintain self-image or to compete for group status. The study concludes that although most audiences enter livestreams with the primary intention of stress relief, when reward behavior becomes entangled with identity maintenance and collective competition, the stress-relieving effect is often difficult to sustain over time and may even exacerbate psychological burdens. Therefore, platforms should strengthen guidance on livestream content and interaction modes, particularly enhancing awareness of emotional manipulation and group psychology among adolescent users. Simultaneously, users should cultivate self-reflective awareness to avoid falling into irrational consumption patterns.

Keywords: team performance livestream rewards, emotional reciprocity, identity construction, competitive comparison, virtual gift economy

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the internet and short-video platforms, online livestreaming has gradually shifted from a marginal entertainment form to a mainstream cultural phenomenon, becoming an important mode of leisure and social interaction for users [1]. In this

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context, performance-oriented livestreams have attracted large audiences due to their real-time interactivity and visual appeal, gradually forming a virtual gift economy centered on "rewards," which constructs a complex system of power and emotional exchange among platforms, streamers, and audiences [2]. This interaction model, based on the circulation of virtual gifts, not only reshapes the logic of online performance viewing but also activates multiple motivations and psychological needs among audiences.

Against this backdrop, a new form of livestreaming—team performance livestreams (hereafter referred to as "team streams")—has rapidly emerged, attracting substantial viewership and rewarding activity. Unlike traditional one-to-many livestreaming modes, team streams feature multiple streamers collaborating and competing in groups, enhancing the ceremonial and competitive nature of content through dance performances, role-based interactions, and dual-way PK (player-kill) contests. Audience participation and content co-creation are facilitated through real-time engagement such as comments, voting, and rewards. This design significantly enhances audiences' sense of presence and involvement, transforming the originally singular "reward-based consumption" into a complex interactive ritual with multi-layered psychological structures [3].

Previous research has explored the psychological structures and behavioral motivations of users in performance livestreams from multiple perspectives. Some scholars have focused on emotional gratification and recognition needs behind reward behavior [4]; others have examined how platform algorithms foster immersive experiences and dependence mechanisms [5]; and some studies have explored how young and middle-aged users obtain virtual companionship and emotional feedback through rewarding [6]. Additionally, research has indicated that audiences are highly sensitive to streamers' performative presentation, with reward behavior often guided by streamer role construction and scene settings [7].

However, most existing studies focus on interactions between individual streamers and audiences, leaving the organizational logic and psychological mechanisms of reward behavior in team-based performances underexplored. In the context of team streams, the highly designed and competitive structure significantly strengthens social comparison and participation motivation among users, making rewards not only a unidirectional, emotion-driven behavior but also a means to demonstrate consumption capacity, intervene in content progression, or participate in "fan battles" [8]. Simultaneously, the collaboration and competition among team streamers require audiences to make value judgments and invest emotionally in multiple targets when rewarding, further increasing the complexity of reward behavior [9].

This study seeks to address the gap in the existing literature regarding reward motivations in team performance livestreams. Focusing on the unique ecosystem of team streams, it explores the psychological drivers of audience reward behavior, including emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and competitive comparison. To this end, the study investigates the reward motivations of audiences in team streams through semi-structured interviews and thematic coding with 15 long-term participants, employing grounded theory for qualitative analysis to reveal the types of motivations and underlying psychological mechanisms behind reward behavior.

2. Research design

2.1. Research method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in grounded theory, exploring audience reward behavior in team performance livestreams. Since reward behavior involves personal emotional expression, identity recognition, and consumption habits, interviews are particularly

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suitable for capturing the psychological motivations of individuals in specific contexts, allowing for the collection of rich and objective first-hand data. The interview content focused on audiences' viewing habits, reward frequency, motivational cognition, social feedback, and emotional relationships. The raw interview data were coded and analyzed thematically to summarize the main psychological mechanisms behind reward behavior.

2.2. Research participants

The primary subjects of this study were viewers on short-video platforms who watch team performance livestreams and engage in consumption behaviors. A total of 15 participants were interviewed (11 female, 4 male), with an average viewing duration of 6.67 months, an average total consumption of 53,660 yuan, and an average monthly reward of 9,890 yuan. Ages ranged from 18 to 38, with an average age of 24, covering students, white-collar workers, and freelancers. By selecting a diverse sample, the study aimed to reflect similarities and differences in reward motivations across different demographic backgrounds.

Table 1. Participant information

No.	Age	Gender	Team Stream Viewing Duration (Months)	Total Reward Amount (CNY)	Average Monthly Reward (CNY)
1	25	Female	12	23000	1916.67
2	19	Female	16	1200	75
3	25	Female	4	60000	15000
4	25	Female	6	2000	333.33
5	20	Female	5	70000	14000
6	19	Female	6	20000	3333.33
7	19	Female	5	8000	1600
8	31	Male	5	260000	52000
9	19	Male	8	3500	437.5
10	38	Female	5	190000	38000
11	26	Female	9	110000	12222.22
12	30	Male	7	50000	7142.86
13	22	Female	3	5000	1666.67
14	20	Female	6	700	116.67
15	23	Male	3	1500	500

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2.3. Data collection and analysis

The primary research data consisted of transcripts from participant interviews. The textual data were first recorded and analyzed to produce open coding, identifying key concepts and recurring themes. On this basis, axial coding was conducted to gradually derive core motivational categories, such as emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and competitive comparison.

2.4. Open coding

Through analysis of the raw transcripts, specific behaviors, viewpoints, and other key concept codes were identified and organized. At this stage, more than 50 core concepts were generated, covering participants' emotional states before and after rewarding, interaction expectations, self-perception, and consumption objectives.

Table 2. Example of open coding

	Concept Description	Corresponding Interview No.
Aa1	Enjoy watching talent performances	1,2,3,7,8,12,13,14
Aa2	Care about livestream atmosphere (host, comments, bullet chat)	1,3,4,5,6,8,10,11,12,13,14,15
Aa3	Do not use reward strategies	1,3,9,11,12,14
…		

2.5. Axial coding and category induction

After completing open coding, these concepts were integrated and grouped into four axial coding categories: emotional reciprocity, identity construction, competitive comparison, and environmental factors.

Table 3. Example of axial coding

Emotional Reciprocity	aa5 Only like one streamer
	aa6 Care about streamer's emotions
	aa10 Equality in relationship
…	

2.6. Selective coding

The study confirmed the core motivational categories as emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and competitive comparison, along with the relatively universal environmental factors. Axial codes were then organized into a logical path of "purpose → motivation → strategy → outcome".

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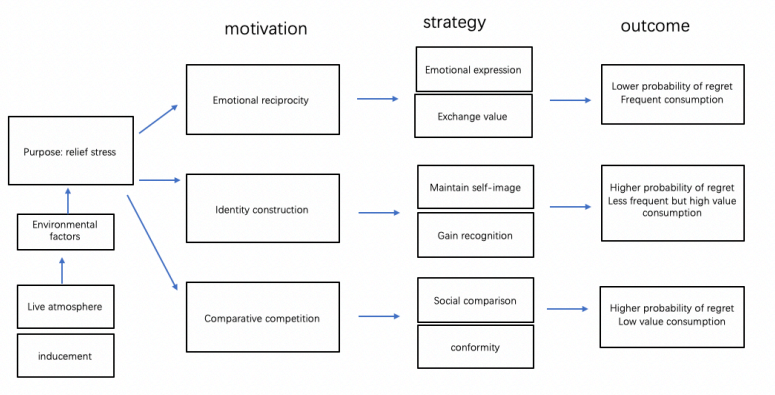


Figure 1. Team performance livestream consumption chart

3. Research results and analysis

3.1. Emotional reciprocity

“Emotional reciprocity” emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned motivations for rewarding among participants. In psychology, the principle of reciprocity suggests that when individuals receive emotional or material support from others, they tend to feel an obligation to give back [10]. In the context of team performance livestreams, this reciprocity manifests as audiences obtaining emotional value from streamers—both in public and private interactions—gaining pleasure and satisfaction that serves stress relief. Streamers, in turn, receive audience engagement and rewards by providing this emotional value. During team streams, multiple streamers perform and compete in the same environment, making it easier for audiences to develop likes or dislikes toward different team members, and even form deeper emotional connections with certain streamers.

Several participants explicitly stated that they liked only one streamer. Even when multiple performers participated in the team stream, they focused their attention on their “favorite” member, corresponding to code Aa5, “only like one streamer.” Audience preference often related to certain traits displayed by streamers both on-screen and privately, such as “especially beautiful, fits my aesthetic,” “he dances the best and adds his own creative touches,” or “very good at chatting, without being overly deliberate… responds to jokes quickly without letting the conversation drop.” Comparisons among multiple streamers in the team stream increased the frequency of audience-streamer interactions and clarified the audience’s choice of focus.

As interactions between audiences and streamers deepen, rewarding becomes not just material support but an informal emotional exchange: participants move from unidirectionally receiving emotional value from streamers to Aa6, “caring about the streamer’s emotions,” and provide emotional value in return through rewards. This reciprocity encompasses not only monetary or material exchange but also emotional support and psychological recognition, as audiences reciprocate the emotional value provided by streamers [6]. For example, one participant said: "During festivals, the platform releases limited-time gifts with impressive visual effects that occupy the entire screen. I just can’t resist; I want them to see all the special effects first… Also, if the streamer doesn’t receive gifts during a festival, they would probably feel unhappy, and I don’t want them to feel that way." Another participant remarked: "She wasn’t feeling well that day and seemed upset. I thought sending the so-called beautiful romantic carriage gift online might lift her mood a little."

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Among female participants, many developed deep emotional bonds with streamers. When describing their relationships, they emphasized Aa10, "relationship equality." Although audiences provided material support, they sometimes acted as "emotional supporters," seeking two-way emotional exchange and mutual recognition. In private interactions with streamers, they might even listen to streamers' complaints and provide emotional value. This trend suggests that many audience-streamer relationships have evolved beyond the traditional "fan–idol" framework toward long-term emotional connections resembling friendships or romantic relationships. Participants expressed a desire to use rewards and interactions to maintain more stable emotional ties.

3.2. Identity construction

"Identity construction" refers to the process by which social actors manage others' impressions of themselves, aiming to establish and maintain social position and symbolic status within a specific field [11]. In team performance livestreams, this process is evident in audiences using rewarding behaviors to create identities such as "high contributors" or "core fans," thereby gaining attention and recognition from streamers and the audience community. This motivation for identity construction does not necessarily stem from personal liking or emotional resonance with a specific streamer but emphasizes how one is perceived by others.

Some participants admitted that they did not enter the livestream every time they watched but would deliberately "remain invisible" or "observe at the doorway for a while." This avoidance is not due to indifference but rather to maintain personal image: "If I hadn't planned to contribute, but others in the room were giving big gifts, not giving a reward could damage my standing, and I might even be criticized by other viewers." In their view, entering a livestream without rewarding could harm their perceived image among the streamer and other fans.

This tendency to "maintain face" extends to the specific strategies of rewarding. When budgets were limited, participants preferred to avoid high-cost segments and instead give rewards during lower-cost parts such as "small icon dances" or "team dances." "During guild competitions, others were giving large gifts worth thousands or tens of thousands; even if I gave a gift to a streamer, it might not be noticed. But during earlier segments, like small icon dances, if I gave a large gift while others gave small ones, the livestream would immediately explode with reactions." The lower cost-perception of rewards enhances the visibility and symbolic status of the rewarding audience.

Therefore, the stage mechanisms of team performance livestreams naturally amplify the demand for performance and visibility. Feedback from both streamers and other fans continuously emphasizes and maintains the social identities constructed by these audiences. Identity-driven rewarders are often not focused on helping a specific streamer "win," but rather on being seen and recognized as having higher social status or consumption capacity.

Platforms further encourage identity-based rewarding through various design mechanisms. For instance, to satisfy audiences' sense of superiority, higher-tier consumers' names remain on the screen longer, with more elaborate visual effects. Additionally, to meet audiences' pursuit of uniqueness, special titles, avatar frames, or exclusive gifts can be unlocked by accumulating a certain recharge amount within a given period.

3.3. Comparative competition

Comparative-competition-driven rewarding focuses on "helping my favored streamer surpass others." It emphasizes collectivity, antagonism, and group belonging. This motivation is rooted in social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate their own value and judgment

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through comparisons with others [12]. In the livestream context, this comparison is externalized through reward competition, where audiences gain psychological satisfaction—such as “I have good taste” or “my fan group is stronger”—by helping their chosen streamer win in competitions.

One participant described: "The PK was so intense. The opposing side kept getting votes, and I really didn’t want her to lose, so I kept recharging. When she lost, I almost cried—it felt like I was being overshadowed by other fans." This type of emotional response indicates that rewarding is not merely an economic behavior but a projection of honor: the streamer’s victory or defeat reflects the audience’s invested value and self-recognition. Social identity theory suggests that individuals closely tie their self-esteem to the honor of their group, and when the group excels, individuals experience elevated self-evaluation [13]. Therefore, these audiences are less concerned with the streamer’s response or personal identity maintenance; they focus more on whether their fan group is dominant. Rewarding thus becomes a tool for collective honor competition.

Furthermore, audiences accustomed to comparative competition tend to favor already famous or influential streamers, even viewing the streamer’s success as an extension of their social capital. "If we lose today, I might not post in their team’s fan group—it would be so embarrassing." These competitive audiences not only actively reward streamers during livestreams but also engage socially with other fans in the streamer’s camp. For instance, they may privately praise streamers, establish connections with high-spending users (e.g., top contributors), or form private groups to maintain their status within the fan community. This strong need for belonging and group identity drives more aggressive and sustained rewarding behaviors.

However, such fan group dynamics can produce interpersonal side effects. As some veteran fans develop deeper personal connections, their relationships with other fans may even surpass their bond with the streamer, reducing the autonomy of rewarding behavior. This may result in phenomena such as “when a close female friend stopped supporting the streamer because she felt the streamer wasn’t sincere, I wavered too… she spent more than me, so she must know the streamer better,” reflecting a “one-person waver, group unfollows” pattern.

Among the three dominant motivations, emotionally reciprocal audiences exhibited the least regret; their rewards were more self-consistent and immediate, less influenced by external evaluations. These audiences usually reward with a “goodwill expression” mindset, perceive the streamer as sincere, and experience positive feedback from their emotional investment. In contrast, identity-constructing and comparative-competition-driven audiences are more likely to feel disappointment or regret if their expectations are unmet.

3.4. Environmental factors

In addition to emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and comparative competition, environmental factors in team performance livestreams also significantly influence audience rewarding behaviors. Many participants reported that their rewarding was not based on rational long-term planning but was driven by the live situation, the pace, and the atmosphere.

Collective emotions in the livestream room easily influence individual emotions. During PK countdowns or when the host urges votes, audiences who had no prior intention to reward may be swept into impulsive consumption: "At that moment, my mind went blank; the atmosphere was intense, and everyone was saying 'hurry, almost there,’ so I joined in, even though later I thought it wasn’t really worth it." This involvement is characterized by temporal pressure, host or fan provocation, and a sense of urgency, which encourages initially non-rewarding viewers to contribute.

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This phenomenon can be explained by “conformity behavior.” Individuals in a group setting are easily influenced by others and tend to act in line with group behavior when their own judgment is unclear (Asch, 1951). Livestreams, with real-time feedback mechanisms, make the pressure of “everyone is consuming” visible, further prompting audiences to mimic others’ rewarding behavior to avoid “falling behind” or creating awkward silence.

However, while many audiences are temporarily guided or influenced to reward by the livestream atmosphere, many explicitly expressed resistance to manipulative tactics, stating: "Phrases like 'Can you help me, Sister XX?’ are moral coercion, demanding one-on-one money." Excessive atmosphere manipulation and consumption inducement can reduce the livestream’s entertainment value, leading audiences to stop rewarding or even unfollow the streamer and livestream room.

Thus, while a positive livestream atmosphere can briefly stimulate emotional engagement and promote rewarding, overuse of conformity-based inducement may harm user experience and platform stickiness.

4. Recommendations

For emotionally reciprocal rewarding, platform design should establish clear emotional boundaries. For example, frequent private chats or offline meetings between streamers and individual users should be limited, and public call-out acknowledgments should be minimized to avoid younger audiences misinterpreting the relationship as special.

Although platforms formally prohibit minors from consuming in livestreams, some institutions bypass regulations through “proxy top-ups,” allowing minors to participate in rewarding indirectly. Platforms should strengthen technical controls and regulatory mechanisms to prevent underage consumption and strictly monitor third-party top-up channels for accountability. Content targeting minors should be carefully reviewed to avoid emotional manipulation or inducement of consumption.

Platforms also have a social responsibility in educating adolescent users, especially in areas of emotional expression, social boundaries, and rational behavior. They should help minors understand the relationship between emotional engagement and monetary behavior in livestreams, fostering healthy consumption habits and social interaction patterns.

For identity-constructing rewarding, in addition to rewards such as rank badges or entrance effects, platforms could introduce non-monetary identity display mechanisms, allowing users to gain recognition without excessive reliance on spending. Algorithmic recommendation designs should reduce the preferential exposure of high-spending users to prevent displays of wealth and false identity comparisons.

For the audience, identity should not be built upon monetary spending or external evaluation. Users can realize self-worth through active participation, content creation, and rational expressions of support, avoiding a vicious cycle of exchanging money for social recognition.

For comparative-competition-driven rewarding, livestream interaction mechanisms should avoid excessively intensifying competitive emotions among users. While PKs and competitions can temporarily boost reward activity, overemphasis on “win–lose” binaries can trigger inter-fan hostility and long-term negative effects. Platforms should also regulate the language environment in livestreams, strictly prohibiting manipulative tactics such as “mocking others” or inciting competitive consumption.

Audiences should be aware of conformity and competitive pressures, rationally interpreting streamers’ successes and failures as well as group honor. Young viewers, in particular, should be educated to recognize emotional manipulation and herd psychology, reducing over-consumption

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driven by virtual prestige or peer pressure. They should understand that a streamer's victory or loss does not equate to their personal value and maintain independent judgment in group interactions, avoiding being led by so-called "core fans" into irrational spending.

5. Conclusion

This study, through interviews with audiences of team-based performance livestreams, identified three primary stress-relief–oriented motivations for rewarding behavior: emotional reciprocity, identity construction, and social comparison/competition. The findings indicate that although performance livestreams are often regarded as a form of stress-relieving entertainment, audience rewarding behavior is rarely simple, and complex psychological drivers underlie it. Some consumers enter livestreams with the intention of alleviating work or academic stress but, over prolonged interaction, become entangled in new sources of pressure such as identity maintenance, group competition, and emotional manipulation. In other words, consumption in team-based livestreams does not provide a long-term emotional regulation function; rather, the interaction mechanisms and pacing of the livestream can induce additional psychological burdens and social pressures. The study ultimately concludes that when identity construction and competitive comparison serve as primary motivations for rewarding, consumers are more prone to a vicious cycle of "stress responding to stress"—experiencing neither sustained psychological comfort nor escaping excessive consumption, and in some cases even leading to disengagement from the streamer.

The theoretical and practical implications of this study are significant. From a theoretical perspective, employing a grounded theory approach with qualitative interviews allowed for a systematic elucidation of the psychological mechanisms underlying livestream rewarding behavior, expanding the scope of existing research on "fan economy" and "emotional capital." By analyzing team-based livestreams—a multi-actor interactive context—this study reveals how individuals reconstruct self-identity and consumption logic amid group competition and emotional reciprocity, enriching the conceptual framework of "identity construction" and "reciprocity psychology" in the digital society. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the pressure-reproduction mechanisms underlying emotional consumption, offering actionable insights for platform management and user education. Platforms should reduce mechanisms that intensify competitive behavior, improve rational consumption prompts, and strengthen the protection and education of adolescent audiences. Individual viewers, in turn, should learn to recognize emotional manipulation and herd psychology, approaching virtual honor and social comparison with rational judgment. Overall, this study not only elucidates the consumption motivations and psychological logic of audiences in team-based performance livestreams but also provides theoretical and practical guidance for fostering a healthier and more socially responsible livestream ecosystem.

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